

I

When I was eleven, I went on a trip with my dad. We were flying out of SJC, the San Jose airport. To be honest, I have very little recollection of where we were even flying, exactly. Somewhere. It doesn't really matter. Near the entrance of SJC's Terminal B, there is a public piano. It's smack in the middle of the floor, a Yamaha or some other grand piano brand, its ivory white keys a beautiful contrast with the polished black wood. On a nice enough day, the light filters through the sliding glass doors of the terminal and illuminates the piano and its surroundings in bright sunlight. This day was one of those days.

"Papa, can I play?" I ask, pointing at the piano.

"Go for it," my dad says.

As I perch myself comfortably on the worn black leather piano bench, I take note of the various adult faces looking at me with curiosity. I'm sure I thought they were all older than they were—for all I know, some of them could have been in their twenties. Everyone looks old when you're eleven. I begin to play, transporting myself into some sort of musical flow state, putting on my best rendition of Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag*. If you've never heard it, I recommend you pull up your go to music player and chuck on the first result. Ragtime is a wild beast, a curious type of music often with a vast space for the player's interpretations of speed and rhythm. As an eleven-year-old pianist with more talent than he likely deserved, I obviously played it way too fast. The curious part about *that*, however, is that it made the song sound very difficult. And when I was done with my Maple Leaf Rag speed record attempt, I was greeted both by a surprising amount of applause from random travelers I'd attracted and a beaming smile from my father. Eleven-year-old me, always a bastion of great manners, responded in kind:

"Where's the money?"

II

I've played piano for almost 15 years of my life. When I first started, at six, it was clear to both my teachers and my parents that I was innately talented at 'tickling the ivories'. Unfortunately for them, I hated practicing. In hindsight, I can only imagine the frustration of being faced with a young student with natural talent who refused to practice. Teachers waved their fists at me in rage as what was potentially a chance at a young prodigy slipped through their fingers. Or maybe they didn't. I didn't pay much attention in lessons either.

For the first many years of my life, I did piano only because my parents made me. Sure, I enjoyed playing every now and then, but piano for me was much like anything else – when you *have* to do it, it isn't as fun. Practicing every night was no more than a chore, an act I blindly

stumbled my way through like unloading the dishwasher or taking out the trash. It's hard to become a prodigy at something when you don't even practice. And trust me, piano teachers know when you haven't been practicing. I've received so many countless lectures about practicing that I can't remember a single one.

“You know you'd be better if you practiced more!” They'd say. “I can tell you haven't been paying attention to these fingerings!”

I didn't care. At seven, I switched from my first teacher to my second. At nine, I switched again. The second time, as my mom was setting up my first lesson with my new teacher, I screamed into the phone that I didn't want to play piano.

Even though my new piano teacher, Paul, lived two blocks away, my parents had to accompany me to lessons for months.

III

Paul's house is a pianist's wonderland. One side, wall to wall, floor to ceiling, is covered in sheet music. The brown wooden shelves support countless centuries of musical history, the nuggets of music found in Mozart's most forgotten concerto's and Beethoven's global hits. Always meticulously organized, Paul could get any piece of music from any composer on his first try. The back wall housed a large window, leaving the soft yellow room often adorned with a beautiful evening glow during my after-school lessons. The centerpiece of the room, as you might expect, is a beautiful Steinway grand. When you enter Paul's house for your lesson, he's often not finished with the previous, so you are greeted with the backend of a serenade from whomever's lesson was before yours. It's a nice system.

I'm not sure exactly how long it took Paul to realize I wasn't going to practice very often. I'm sure I looked in his eyes like a problem case may look to a therapist – his normal methods of teaching piano were likely to fail, much like the other teachers who had tried and failed before him. Paul, bless his soul, was not discouraged by my screaming of my distaste for piano playing through the phone or my blatant disregard for practicing. He adapted his methods as a teacher, determined to get me to use my piano talent in any way he could. Hence, Paul marked the true beginning of my joy for music.

IIII

People often expect you to enjoy things you are good at. While I think it may be harsh to say that I didn't enjoy piano at all, it isn't all that untrue to say there were important aspects of it

I sure as hell didn't like. Similar to the rest of my life, I hated things that were rote, boring, repetitive – such as practicing pieces or reading music. Instead, I liked variety, the experience of trying new pieces and exploring new areas in the world of music. Paul, unlike the other teachers I'd had up to that point, used that to his advantage in teaching me piano. Some days, we'd be working on a piece, and suddenly he'd stand up and move to a smaller electric piano that sits comfortably next to the grand. I'd watch, the sun slowly setting as the world moved on outside his window. But us, we were trapped in our own world of music.

“Let's do some improvisation, shall we?” he'd ask.

I'd nod.

“G major,” he'd say, or maybe “E minor”.

Sometimes it'd get even crazier, and we'd find ourselves playing in random things like F# major locrian. We'd never count down, never start together, just, one of us would start playing. The other would join in soon after, and we would have a conversation through our music. Other days we'd get sidetracked, lost in discussions of ethics, science, history, whatever it may be. And somehow, we'd always end up at music. It wasn't uncommon for us to run fifteen, thirty minutes over time because we got caught up with something. And it was on a fateful Thursday in middle school, enjoying the short walk home from Paul's house to mine after a lesson that had run way late, that I realized he'd done something that my other piano teachers, that even my parents could not do.

He made me love piano.

Sure, I still failed to practice as much as I should have, and I definitely could've worked more on sight reading. Yet, every night when I sat down to play, I felt a joy that I never felt before my lessons with Paul. Piano became an important part of my identity, a skill I could invest in that would pay me dividends on every day of the week. If I ever felt sad, I could sit on my old wooden piano seat and bang out a song or two on the upright piano. I'd think back to some music theory joke Paul had said in last week's lesson or improvise and pretend he was playing with me, and suddenly, I wouldn't feel so bad any more. I could play for family, for friends. I could even play for just me.

Each year, Paul bestows upon his students a silver investment coin. I have ten different coins, dating back to the first year I started in 2009. He likes the symbolism of an investment coin because he believes that piano is a skill that you invest in. The more you practice, the more you love it, the more enjoyment you get from it.

To me, these investment coins represent a different investment, the investment Paul made in a kid who never practiced, who yelled his hatred of piano into his mother's phone. He gave me the gift of his time, the gift of his love for piano. Through our weekly lessons, Paul became more

than a piano teacher to me, he became a mentor whose wisdom I will carry with me for the rest of my life.